

California Republicans offer bills on education funds

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While Democrats continue their push for taxes by highlighting cuts in the classroom, Assembly Republicans on Thursday unveiled a package of education bills that they say would free up existing funds.

As the state faces budget problems, Republican leader Mike Villines said, lawmakers should untether school districts from state-issued mandates. He said handing financial flexibility back to local school officials would help them weather difficult times.

"The key of what we're trying to do is strip some of the handcuffs that are put on them," said the Clovis lawmaker. "Most of them will say if they can use funds in different ways to manage tough times, that's what we want to do – give them flexibility to do it."

Under the GOP proposal, schools would be allowed to carry over any unspent money from funds known as "categoricals" – money dedicated for specific purposes, such as special education and class-size reduction. The current budget devotes nearly \$15 billion to support such programs statewide.

Another of the bills would consolidate the number of categorical programs from 62 to six, which would allow schools to tap funds to better meet their needs, said Assemblyman Mike Duvall of Yorba Linda. Duvall is carrying that bill.

Bill McGuire, associate superintendent of administrative services at the Clovis Unified School District, said the Republican package would free up money from those programs to help his district deal with \$8.7 million in anticipated cuts. The district is considering eliminating administrative positions, leaving non-teaching jobs unfilled and not hiring any new teachers.

"The most important thing is it has to happen now, because we are currently preparing for the '08-09 school year," McGuire said.

"These items of flexibility, if they are given to us now, would mean we do not have to do those things," McGuire added.

Steve Maviglio, spokesman for Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez, criticized the Republican plan as an attempt to gain political cover after GOP members voted down a bill to close tax loopholes on privately owned boats, planes and RVs.

"Flexibility is nothing more than code for cut," Maviglio said.

Other bills in the package would relieve school districts from state mandates when the state doesn't cover the costs.

Another measure, Assembly Bill 2406 by Villines, would require schools to give third-grade reading report cards to let parents know whether their children are reading at their grade level.